



the children's charity

improving young lives every day

Sporting opportunities for children with disabilities Is there a Level Playing Field?



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Foreword

One of my earliest sporting memories is running full pelt down a school playing field, the grassy track lined with classmates cheering the runners. It was our annual Sports Day against another village primary school and I remember the baton in my outstretched arm, my friend's look of concentration, of nervous anticipation, as she waited for me to pass it to her. I can still feel every fibre of my being willing me towards the handover point and the explosive exhilaration when I reached it.

These memories are commonplace for most of us. Whether we were sports mad and had a different activity lined up every night of the week or just wanted to run around and play with our friends, these games were an integral part of what it meant to be a child; to be happy, carefree and in the moment.

The countless benefits of sport in children's physical, mental and emotional development are well documented. It is on the playing field that we test ourselves, where we better ourselves. We learn the rules of engagement and lessons of life – teamwork, respect, determination, endurance and simply but so importantly, to have fun.

And yet hundreds of thousands of children who cope with sickness, disability or disadvantage never have the chance to create these memories. Simple pleasures like kicking a ball around, signing up for swimming lessons or learning a new sport are too often inaccessible to them.

Here at Variety, the Children's Charity, we have been helping children with disabilities in the UK since 1949. We provide practical, tangible help that makes an immediate difference to those children and their families. This means everything from giving life-changing equipment, improving mobility and organising Great Days Out to create the memories that every child deserves.

We know how tough children's lives can be sometimes, the daily struggle that comes with a long-term illness or disability. However, we also know that sometimes the real pain can come from the hidden challenges and barriers, the small, everyday activities children with disabilities miss out on. Sport is one of them.

Public attitudes have changed when it comes to elite athletes with a disability. We marvelled at the Team GB Paralympians in action bringing home 147 medals from Rio last year and we are gearing ourselves up for the Para Athletics Championships taking place in London in July. So why has this thinking not carried through for every child with a disability?

Through our work we want every child, regardless of their ability or disability, to experience these life-enhancing moments. This is why we have commissioned this research report to begin to understand the barriers that prevent children with a disability accessing sport, and what we can all do about it. We will follow this with a consultation process to find how collectively we can overcome the barriers children with disabilities face in enjoying sport. Our work leads us to believe that these barriers are not as big or insurmountable as some may think.

As one sporting great, Muhammad Ali, once said: "It isn't the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out; it's the pebble in your shoe."

What is the pebble stopping us from levelling the playing field and how do we remove it?

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sarah Nancollas". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Sarah Nancollas, Chief Executive
Variety, the Children's Charity





Executive summary

- More than one in 10 (11%) of parents in Great Britain say at least one of their children's day-to-day activities are limited due to a long-term health problem or disability.
- Half of those parents said their child is not comfortable taking part in sports with only 9% saying that their child takes part in sports at a specialist sports club.
- Of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, mainstream schools and voluntary sector groups (clubs and community groups working with under 18's in informal education settings) we spoke to, 96% provided general physical activities on a regular basis, but only 81% provided adapted physical activities for children with disabilities. Even less, 49%, provided adapted extra-curricular activities.
- For parents, the biggest barrier to their child participating in sport was social stigma. Over a third (36%) of parents reported that their child had experienced negative social attitudes to their health problem or disability, in relation to sport. The experience of youth and children's clubs is similar with 40% reporting the same.
- Over 70% of those schools and voluntary sector groups who expressed an opinion said that a lack of participation contributed to disabled children's social isolation and lack of confidence or reduced their life experiences. Others reported a negative impact on emotional and physical wellbeing.
- 69% of schools and voluntary sector groups surveyed identified the biggest barrier to children with disabilities accessing sports was the costs involved in travel, equipment, coaching and membership fees.
- 82% of schools and children's groups reported that the availability of appropriate facilities or equipment was a key barrier to participation by children with disabilities.
- There was a marked difference in attitudes to team and competitive sports with SEN schools creating significantly more opportunities for children to participate and highlighting the value of this in personal development. Of those surveyed, collectively SEN schools recommended 34 unique sporting activities as being preferred by children with disabilities compared to 21 recommended from mainstream schools.
- Variety, the Children's Charity will shortly launch a consultation and campaign to produce a set of recommendations and solutions to allow more children with disabilities to access sport and reap the numerous emotional, mental, physical, social and educational benefits.

Sporting Opportunities for Children with Disabilities

Overview of research

We know there are around 770,000 children in the UK living with disabilities¹. This is equal to around one in 20 children. From our work, we understand that too often these children aren't able, or invited, to participate in the same sporting opportunities as children unaffected by disabilities or health conditions. This is despite the known health and social development benefits of sport for children and young people.

Of course, this is not done through malice or ill will. For families, schools and councils trying to manage with limited time and resources, it can either be overlooked, or painfully weighed up before the decision is made that it is simply too difficult, too risky to do.

However, while this evidence is expansive, having been gleaned through our work over nearly 70 years, it is also anecdotal. We wanted to explore the issue and its impact in more detail, understanding how we can create a more level playing field, leading us to compile this report from two main data strands:

1. We worked with the researcher YouGov to question 1,235 parents of children aged 4 to 18 in Great Britain. Over one in 10 parents surveyed (11%) said at least one of their children's day-to-day activities were limited due to a long-term health problem or disability. Of these, nearly half (45%) said their child attends a mainstream school or college with no special educational wing, while others attend a specialist school (21%), mainstream school with a specialist division (16%) or don't attend school or college at all (12%).
2. We also conducted an online poll of 97 staff we work with across schools and voluntary sector groups, who collectively work with over 9,500 children with disabilities. The majority (72%) work in a Special Educational Needs (SEN) school, while 15% are from organisations or groups working with children or young people and 10% are from mainstream schools. While this data is not representative of the UK educational or voluntary sector, it gives us valuable insights into the challenges, opportunities and work being done in this field.

The current state of play

When we asked parents of children with a disability or long-term health issue how comfortable their child felt playing sports with other children, 50% said they were uncomfortable – half of these said they were not at all comfortable – and fewer than one in five (19%) said their child was very happy playing sports.

This clearly has an effect on these children's ability to take part in sports. While half (52%) of parents said their child can take part via their school or college, only one in five parents reported their child belonging to a sports club (19%). Fewer than one in 10 parents say their child has access to a specialist sports club (9%).

Head teachers, teachers, youth & children's workers and support staff nearly all reported that they provide general physical activities (89%) or extra-curricular physical activities (76%), yet these numbers fell when asked if they provided regular adapted sports (69%) or extra-curricular adapted sports (39%).



¹. Source: Disability Living Foundation (2014)
All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 6660 adults, of which 137 are parents with a child 4 to 18 who has a disability. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25th - 30th May 2017. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

As one member of staff working with young people in the voluntary sector said: “Large groups of students to organise often mean that adaptations are minimal.” This will exclude a significant number of children from being able to participate, especially in extracurricular activities.

The adapted sporting activities provided range from non-competitive sports, played for general exercise (for 78% of schools and organisations) to team sports (45%) and individual sports (52%). SEN schools played significantly more team sports than mainstream schools (56% compared to 33%), and provided a much wider range of opportunities than mainstream schools and voluntary sector groups. Mainstream schools reported that almost double the amount of disabled children enjoy individual sports rather than team sports (58% compared to 33%) while for SEN schools, there was a broadly equal preference with 56% of disabled children preferring team sports and 60% preferring individual sports. In the right environment and faced with a greater range of sporting choices it appears that disabled children prefer sports that help them socialise. Outside an SEN environment, children with a disability have fewer opportunities.

The popularity of team sports is important to note here, as these activities can be particularly beneficial in helping children with disabilities interact and socialise with other children. This is especially significant given that only 19% of parents surveyed said their children play sports with friends. One school reported: ‘Children facing these barriers do not get the same opportunities for building friendships through joint participation or being part of a team’.

Barriers to sport

Having established the current state of play, we then set out to find the main barriers to children with disabilities accessing sport.

We identified two main barriers:

1. Isolation and social stigma
2. Cost
 - of facilities and equipment
 - of suitable transport
 - of coaching and membership

Isolation and social stigma

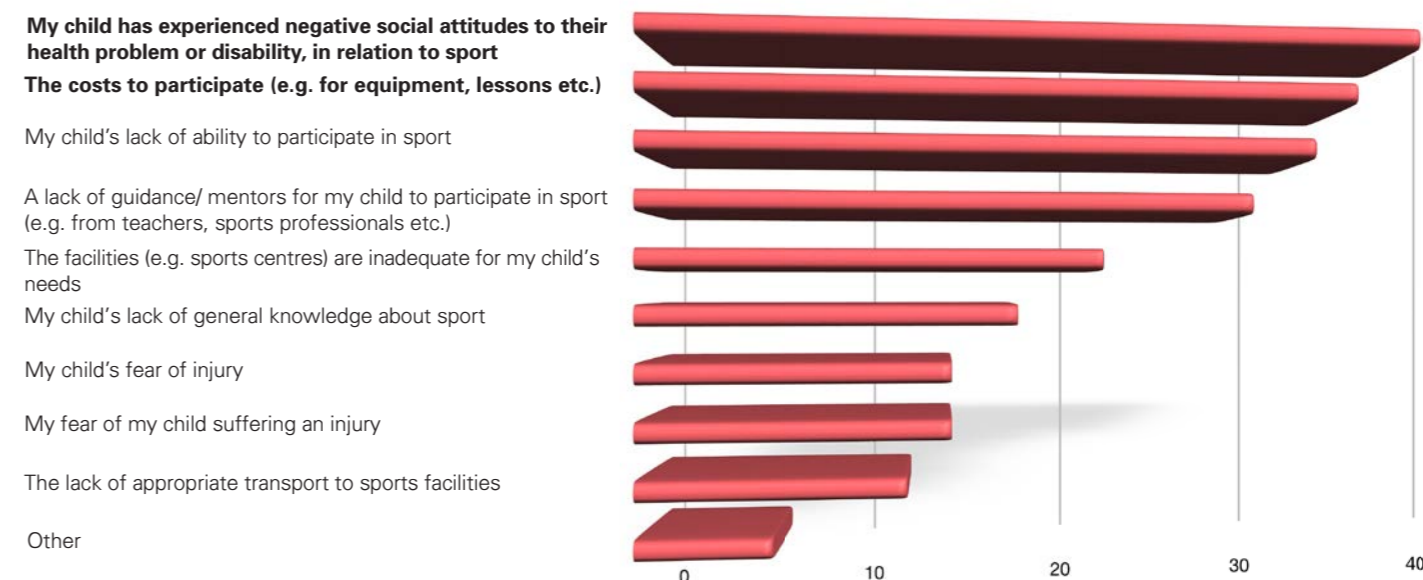
A number of factors were listed by parents as barriers to their children participating in sports. What disappointed us is that the most cited reason – above cost, infrastructure and ability – was stigma, despite the positive public response to our elite athletes with a disability.

Over a third (36%) of parents reported that their child had experienced negative social attitudes to their health problem or disability, in relation to sport.

This finding was further illustrated by the comments these parents made. “He is self-conscious and has been put off sport” one reported, while others talked about ‘embarrassment’ and ‘extreme social anxiety.’ One put it simply: “My child is afraid of being mocked by others”.



Parents identified the following barriers to the child with disability from accessing sport



While 25% of schools cited negative social attitudes as a barrier, voluntary sector groups reported this as much more significant barrier at 36%, reflective of operating in a more public space.

Although it is natural that parents are more attuned to their individual child's social comfort and psychological wellbeing than school staff would be, those working with children see the barrier of social stigma as a cyclical issue – children with disabilities feel isolated so they do not participate in sport but end up feeling even more isolated, as a result.

Schools that report the highest numbers of children who prefer to play competitive sport, also report that negative social attitudes form a less significant barrier (22% compared to 56% in clubs). Like team sports, competitive sports reduce social isolation by their nature and participation in them has significant benefits for emotional wellbeing and social development.

Costs

The remaining barriers, perhaps less surprisingly, centre on the costs of providing specialist or adapted activities for children facing disabilities.

A third (33%) of parents listed costs as a barrier, with some anecdotally talking about activities previously provided by their local council being cut.

Staff in children's organisations and schools talked about the general squeeze on costs and resources, with one saying: “There are plenty of sports I think would greatly benefit our learners, however we have to prioritise and be realistic about taking into consideration the cost, travel or buying equipment or managing facilities.”

Facilities and equipment

4 out of 5 schools reported inadequate facilities or equipment as a barrier. This is despite the fact that these schools are offering participation in adapted sports as part of their curriculum and half offer adapted sports as an extracurricular activity. This shows how much schools are doing with limited resources and highlights the potential access that could be opened up if they were resourced fully. As one school commented “Children need to build confidence and skill in a familiar environment yet funders always want to push us to get them to go to sports centres and leisure centres. Nobody will invest in supporting our disabled led delivery from our own safe and accessible space.”

Equipment was the highest single cost barrier, identified by 53% of organisations surveyed (rising to 75% for children's clubs).

SEN schools that had received a Variety Equipment Grant were 23% less likely to identify equipment costs as a barrier, however this was the opposite with mainstream schools and voluntary sector groups. (67% compared to 44% of those who had not). This suggests that for those organisations not geared to supporting children with disabilities, so much is required that, once attuned to this, the inadequacy of equipment becomes a more distinctly pressing issue.

Organisations that identified facilities as a barrier were 24% more likely to also identify transport as an issue, suggesting that where inadequate facilities are a barrier, transport to access better facilities becomes more important and a compounding difficulty.

Suitable Transport

Two thirds of mainstream schools reported transportation as an issue (67%) whilst overall the figure was under half (43%).

Notably, organisations who had not received a Variety Sunshine Coach were 33% more likely to identify either the cost or lack of transport as a barrier (71% compared to 54%).

Transport was less of an issue for parents although it was still a barrier for nearly 1 in 8 families (12%). This is not surprising when we know that only 9% of children play sports with a specialist sports club.

Coaching and membership

Costs related to coaching and membership fees was a barrier for 59% of schools and 75% of voluntary sector organisations. Only 4% of organisations surveyed told us that they needed more staff, however over half (52%) reported needing help with coaching or membership fees. This suggests that respondents believe they should be offering a higher standard of opportunity than they currently are but need to bring specialist skills into their teams.

The cost of hiring or training staff in sports coaching is prohibitive and although SEN schools offer involvement in a wider range of sports, almost half (47%) identify coaching and membership fees as a barrier, second only to the cost of equipment. The views of parents aligned in this area with 28% of saying staff mentoring was an issue, which resulted in a lack of appetite or guidance for children.

Over a third of organisations we surveyed (37%) identified a lack of adult guidance or encouragement into sport as a barrier.



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33% of parents said costs were a barrier to their child accessing sport



4 out of 5

schools reported inadequate facilities and equipment as a barrier



Almost half
45%

of schools say coaching and club membership fees are a barrier for children with disabilities accessing sport



66%

of mainstream schools saying transport is an issue

Impact

When we asked staff what the effect was for these children facing barriers to taking part in sport, the results were stark. Overall, 71% of schools and children's groups who expressed an opinion said that a lack of participation contributed to disabled children's social isolation, lack of confidence or reduced their life experiences.

Other areas highlighted were a negative impact on emotional (16%) and physical wellbeing (20%).

"The psychological benefits of exercise are just as important as the physical ones" one staff member in a SEN School told us.

The knock-on effects of this psychological impact were also mentioned, as one staff member summed up: "Their self-esteem is affected as they feel they are different from their peers. Low self-esteem then affects their learning."

While the negative effects of not being able to join sports and activities can be far-reaching, the benefits to children with disabilities when they do have access to sports and activities can be significant, even disproportionate.

"I have seen a major transformation in the social development of children with physical disabilities who begin to attend extra curricular sports clubs regularly outside of school on a long-term basis," a SEN staff member relayed to us.

Another said: "Teachers tell us that our coaching sessions have made a huge impact on the children. Their motor and mental systems have shown improvement after a few sessions."

It is clear the potential benefits of opening sport up to children and young people facing difficult, long-term health conditions and disabilities could be huge, encompassing physical, emotional and mental improvements.

Case studies

Robin Barwick, Assistant Head at Bensham Manor School in Thornton Heath, Croydon

Robin is a teacher at a SEN community school in Croydon, which caters for students with moderate learning difficulties. With almost 195 pupils, 30 of whom have severe disabilities, Robin is used to getting children of all ages and abilities to participate in sport.

"Sport is such a key part of the curriculum at Bensham Manor. We know it has a profound impact on our pupils' lives and is crucial to developing their physical and social skills, giving them confidence to interact with others socially and developing their social and competitive skills in a positive environment," he says.

"We are always looking for opportunities for our pupils to participate in competitive sports with their peers – both with those with and without disabilities. Sports are an area that many children excel in at school, rather than traditional subjects, and the medals these children receive when they take part in competitions hang proudly on their walls and are often cherished for life."

However, getting children to participate in sports isn't always easy. Robin has observed pupils in Year 7 turning up in their first few weeks at Bensham Manor without their P.E. kit, as they never participated in sports at primary school due to their disability. There are also pupils who find sports an uncomfortable experience socially and often get frustrated at what they perceive to be their conditions holding them back.

One of the largest barriers Robin believes hinders children with disabilities from participating and enjoying sports is travel and the ability to get to competitions.

"If the school didn't have their Sunshine Coach from Variety, we would simply be unable to get to sports tournaments across the country. Travelling independently isn't an option for most of our pupils – many of them come from lower-income households so it's crucial that the school facilitates and transports pupils to tournaments or competitions. Otherwise, they'd never get the opportunity to go and demonstrate their skills."

Nicola Turner, parent to seven year-old James Turner, who has Cerebral Palsy

Nicola applied to Variety in 2013 for a Kidwalker – a piece of equipment that would allow her son James, who suffers from Cerebral Palsy, to move around independently and kick a football with his friends.

At the age of 7, James struggles to get involved at sports at his school. As he has to travel a long way to his school, James is unable to take part in after-school activities, as he would have no way of getting home.

“Even if there was an after-school club available, I’d be unable to get him there and pick him up from it. We can hardly get on London trains and tubes at rush-hour so sadly he misses out.”

Nicola also thinks that her son lacks positive role models who he can look up to. Being in primary school, Nicola also believes that there are fewer clubs and sports opportunities available to someone of her son’s age – and that specialist clubs only exist for teenagers.

“My son isn’t interested in athletics. He loves football, but no-one he sees on the TV has any visible disabilities. He also doesn’t have any role models who are a similar age, so has no one to look up to. Most of the clubs available to children with disabilities are for teenagers, or those who have shown a particular talent, but he has nothing suitable for him to join. When he joined in the 2016 Parallel Run at the Olympic Park, where he was surrounded by peers with various disabilities, he had a great time. I’d like him to have more of these opportunities with his friends in the future.”



Joy & Miriam Haizelden, sisters aged 18 and 19 who have played wheelchair basketball for Team GB

Joy & Miriam Haizelden are sisters that were adopted by parents Jim and Margaret in 2005. Both girls have Spina Bifida, a rare developmental fault that leaves a gap in the spine. Their father was always looking at ways to keep his daughters active. However, this used to be a struggle for Joy and Miriam, who were often left out of PE lessons at their school and forced to sit on the side lines, or in classrooms.

“Dad always tried to get us active because he did not want us to be couch potatoes. At school, we didn’t participate in sports – it just wasn’t an option for either of us” says Miriam.



Fortunately, Joy and Miriam bumped into a friend from primary school at a wheelchair exhibition and offered for the girls to come and watch her play wheelchair basketball at her after-school club. That visit triggered the start of the sisters careers as wheelchair basketball players.

At the age of 15, Joy was the youngest player to be chosen to represent Great Britain at the 2014 Women’s World Wheelchair Basketball Championship in Toronto. She also won gold for Team GB in the Women’s U25 World Wheelchair Basketball Championships in Beijing in 2015. Miriam earned a place at the prestigious GB Futures training camp in 2014 alongside Joy.

For the sisters, they say that believing in themselves was the biggest thing that held them back from taking part in sports. They are now proud Variety ambassadors who are encouraging other children to get into sports.

“Believe in yourself. That’s the one thing that held me back. No matter what people said to me, I didn’t believe in myself and I was the biggest obstacle. Having these setbacks helped me mature as a person and as a player” says Miriam.

“Sport has made me more independent and helped me develop my skills. Being a Variety ambassador has really boosted my confidence and I’m hoping that others can see that, if I’ve done it, they can do it too” says Joy.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this report, we knew that there was a problem with children with disabilities in the UK accessing sports. What has disappointed us is the sheer scale of the issue, with less than half of children with a disability feeling comfortable to play sport with other children. Professionals working with these young people highlight the positive social, physical and emotional impact that sport can have on individual wellbeing.

What we can see from our research is that social stigma is a significant hurdle preventing children with a disability from accessing sport. For parents, it is the biggest barrier whilst professionals rated it just behind cost. It is clear that a level playing field doesn’t currently exist for these children living with disability.

The issues highlighted in this report compound each other. We know that children will benefit significantly when they find the right sport for them. For this to happen, facilities need upgrading and a range of equipment needs sourcing.

We know that team or competitive sports offers the best opportunity to reduce social isolation. This requires access to a wide range of sports and resourcing these costs money. We need accessible venues, suitable equipment, the appropriate coaching to build confidence and simply to be able to get children to these places.

We know that resources are not found overnight, but may be achieved more quickly than changing opinions and attitudes. It is important that we take a holistic view of the situation and work across a number of fronts at the same time: a greater number of children with disabilities being present and participating in sporting activities will start to reverse attitudes of ‘disabled means unable’. At the same time, the children we are responsible for helping must feel supported. Sport at its best is inclusive and uplifting, but at its worst it can be scary and alienating. It is vital that we create a positive environment for all involved in playing and enjoying sport.

If we get this part right, the pay-off will be huge. From a physical perspective, children with disabilities are more likely to suffer from obesity and other health-related issues, which better access to sports could help to alleviate. Emotionally, participation in sports can help children struggling with disabilities improve their self-confidence, social skills, and give them an important outlet.

Taking these considerations into account, this year we will launch a consultation on this issue, with the aim to start a dialogue with interested and relevant parties so we can work together towards a set of recommendations and solutions.

This consultation will seek answers to how we can increase the proportion of disabled children who are able to participate in and enjoy sport, remove the social stigma they face, build confidence and ensure they are supported with the right and proper infrastructure, guidance and opportunities.

With the world’s eyes on London this month with two major sporting events for athletes with a disability taking place here – Wimbledon and the World Para Athletics Championships – what better time to create a more level playing field for some of society’s most vulnerable groups?

We would love to discuss this important subject with anyone who would like to work together towards a positive, constructive change.

For more information, please visit www.variety.org.uk or contact us on levelplayingfield@variety.org.uk

Thank you for reading our report.

About Variety, the Children's Charity

Variety, the Children's Charity, believes that neither disability nor disadvantage should prevent a child from realising their full potential. Since setting up in the UK in 1949, the charity has raised over £200 million and supported over 800,000 children affected by ill health, disadvantage and disability.

With a focus on helping children make the most of their childhood, Variety the Children's Charity, provides support through four core programmes:

Mobility - providing specialist equipment including customised electric wheelchairs and bespoke Sunshine Coaches for schools ensuring children develop a greater sense of freedom and adventure

Health - equipping children's hospitals with the latest medical technology and life changing aids

Education - equipping Youth Clubs and young people's organisations – facilitating new skills and developing greater self-worth

Great Days Out – creating memorable experiences through educational programmes and exciting outings

Variety, the Children's Charity, launched in the United States in 1928 and is one of the oldest international children's charities. It has charities across more than 10 countries (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Jersey, Republic of Ireland, Israel, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Australia, Barbados and Eastern Caribbean) helping children at the local community level.

Variety partnered with SportsAid to support young sporting talent from different Paralympic disciplines, by providing essential items such as sport kits and equipment, to support with travel costs and accommodation. Of the 55 disabled athletes Variety has supported, 17 were chosen as part of Team GB for the 2012 London Paralympics and included Gold Medal winners and MBE honourees Ollie Hynd and Johnnie Peacock.

Variety is a registered charity in England and Wales (209259) and Scotland (SC038505)

For more information or to donate to Variety, please visit www.variety.org.uk

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